DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 057 CS 203 582

AUTHOR Samuelson, Janet
TITLE The Meeting Ground of Creative Writing and Composition.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); *Creative Writing; Diaries; *Educational Needs; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Problems; Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS *Student Journals

ABSTRACT

Many of the problems that confront students in creative writing courses are similar to those experienced by students of other types of composition. This discussion delineates three problems that seem to be at the core of the difficulties for both groups of students: preconceived notions of what an essay, poem, or short story should be; inability or unwillingness to adjust the focus of examination to deal with the specific; and lack of imagination. It is suggested that students can profit from keeping a journal (written in the third person) and that they might be well served by an overview provided in a workshop-type class in which the relationship between creative writing and other kinds of composition is recognized. (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Janet Samuelson

ED144057

THE MEETING GROUND OF CREATIVE WRITING AND COMPOSITION

No one will deny the burgeoning of creative writing and composition courses in universities across the country. Composition is seeing its second wave of popularity while creative writing is coming into its own for the first time as a viable field of study in English departments. Few professors, however, would even consider that the two groups have much in common. Before a page is even read, one assumes more importance than the other: one set of papers becomes potential pieces of literature; the other is a stack of obligations. Such attitudes don't help either group of students. They also force the professor into rusty stereotypic behavior -- behavior, by the way, that any astute student can easily recognize. Not only is such thinking unhelpful, but it's misleading for the simple reason that what we, as professors, want from all students -- creative writing, composition, and literature -- is an unflagging respect for the word, for the power that language holds. It is at this point, I think, that we find the meeting ground of creative writing and composition, a meeting ground, I might add, that takes on added significance when we consider the undisguised warfare in many departments between the so-called academicians and creative writers.

On this common ground, it doesn't take long to realize that many of the problems that crop up in creative writing are akin to those difficulties that composition students face and vice versa. I would like to address myself to three particular problems that seem to be the core of the difficulties both groups of students face.

CS 203 582

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Janet Samuelson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

The first problem that arises in both courses, and a problem with which I deal immediately, concerns pre-conceived notions of what an essay, poem, or short story should be. A good portion of my time is spent breaking down stereotypes: "It can't be a successful poem if it doesn't rhyme'; "This is a failed essay because I don't see a formal introduction"; "There can't be dialogue here if it's not in short sentences with quotation marks." In an article entitled "The Devil's Syllabus" in College Composition and Communication, Clark Brown wrote, "students ... clutter up their work with unnecessary and clubfooted formality ... Chekhov said 'that's when you're most tempted to lie.'" Charles Olson, in his manifesto on projective verse published in Poetry New York in 1950, said, "Form is never more than an extension of content." In his famed article on poetics, Galway Kinnell aptly stated, "Fixed form, in our time anyway, seems to bring you to a place where someone has been before." Few good writers (creative or expositorial) let form dictate content. Form, through content, is what we should demand from our composition and creative writing students. The rhetorical modes taught in many university composition courses promote not only canned essays, but one-dimension writing. Writing in traditional forms may be interesting finger exercises for students but fails to demand what all good writing should: content on an equal footing with form.

A second problem that looms just as large as stereotypes is the students' inability or unwillingness to adjust their focuses, to deal with the specific. For some reason, the universal and

mundane seem better than the small, controlled, and focused eye. In composition, it's the student who writes about abortion, cloning, and God in the Twentieth Century; in creative writing, it's the student who deals with love, hate, and death in a three-stanza poem or the story writer who ties up all of existentialism in a two-page suicide. No matter how armed I am with dittos and books -- all of which, by the way, promote my point of specific example -- students invariably nod with understanding when I deal with specific/general, concrete/abstract, but then slip into their old habits of being as vague as possible. The problem involves the distinction between show and tell. Poets and fiction writers can tell (if they want to lose their audience quickly), but can they show their statement, character, theme? The same holds true for the expository prose writer. Tell the reader whatever you want, but can you show him the progression of ideas or the examples that support your stance? I say to both groups of students, "slow down; reduce the aperture of your eye; make your point by the support systems in your piece of writing and not by your word alone."

The final problem, and probably the most frightening of the three, involves the students' unwillingness or inability to use imagination. The composition and creative writing papers I have seen recently can be unequivocally characterized as one-dimensional and non-explorative. Students refuse to take risks in their own writing (which may be related to the first problem of stereotypes I mentioned earlier in this paper). Because of this static attitude, their work, creative writing and composition, blends into a

non-descript melange of generalized trivia. It lacks texture, vitality, urgency, and interest. Invariably, the imagery in poetry is painfully the same; the plot in short story after short story is reminiscent of every other plot; the topic, set of examples, and execution of expository prose are like that of every other paper. Whether we blame this problem on students' lack of reading, on television, on stereotypic thinking or on their penchant for broad, unspecified ideas, the problem still exists. Here, I think, is where journal writing can make an important contribution. Like Clark Brown, I feel that freewriting, stream-of-consciousness writing, call it what you will, has a limited value: "The students who profit most from it are those who already write well." But if we turn to journal writing as a viable means of first draft writing, we may be solving more than their problems with imagination.

I find it valuable for students to create their own fictions. In journal form, if they can follow their daily thoughts, impressions, dreams, ideas, and fantasies, they might become more in tune with the primacy and singularity of writing as communication (I will address myself to this idea more fully later). But instead of having them use the first person personae, it is advisable for them to use the third person (second person creates pontification). The third person serves as a distancing device: it creates that needed sense of objectivity while allowing them to explore personal feelings and concerns. This exercise balances their objective and subjective worlds. Journal writing of this sort also begins making them see the relationship between writer and critic: the experiences

are theirs, but the third person format makes them the outward objective eye. I might add that this exercise brings students back to the oral tradition and promotes honesty and directness in writing.

The three problem areas I've discussed not only unite the difficulties that creative writing and composition students face; they also define the role of the professor in both courses. The tasks of creative writing as well as of composition professors involves sharpening our students' fields of perception, grounding their writing in a framework (be it historical, regional or personal), probing their observations, helping them synthesize their experiences, promoting the written word as a forum for their ideas, and in many cases, making them realize that they have something to say. But even these tasks are useless unless the students are ready for them and want to explore them. Instead of starting freshmen out with a basic rhetoric or creative writing course, it might be more fitting and beneficial to give them a good dose of Humanities 101. Most students desperately need an overview, a sense of something having happened outside their dormitory rooms, a skiing vacation in Colorado, or their latest unrequited love affair. As for creative students, a poetry or fiction reading course to accompany or precede their workshops seems appropriate, if only to force feed them the material they should have read in each genre.

Unless we want to become automatons that mark comma splices, cliches, and generalizations without a second look, we must become resource people who can direct students' misconceptions to the appropriate materials. In most cases, the damage of poor habits and

attitudes has been done. My methods of dealing with these students are not preventative as much as medicinal. As professors, as people committed to the written word, we must become the judicious scale that balances the content with the form in student expository prose, poetry, and fiction. We must become readers with keen, critical awarenesses who can spot the one sentence or line of hope in an otherwise deplorable piece of writing. We must become leaders of workshop-type classes where we deal with writing, not forms, and reading, not lukewarm paraphrasing gimmicks.

Finally, and most importantly, creative writing and composition professors must recognize the kinship between each other, the bonds that make these two courses so alike: all good writing is creative, all good writing is insight, and all good writing cannot be replaced by any of the other media. Moreover, all good writing is an individual and singular experience for expository prose writers as well as for creative writers. It is hard, lonely work. For good writers, the process or the "doing" supercedes the "finished product." But of prime importance (and what becomes miraculous to me the more I write), writing is a permanent record of the progression of thought and feeling; it is the blueprint of the mind's evolution. It is a gestalt process that encompasses all fields of knowledge. For creative writing students as well as for composition students, the written word, at worst is haphazard and complacent; at best, it is a matter of integration and of survival.